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An ESSAY *on the* VARIATIONS *of* ENGLISH PROSE, *from the* REVOLUTION *to the* PRESENT TIME. *By* THOMAS WALLACE, *A. B. and M. R. I. A.; to which was adjudged the Gold Prize Medal propoſed by the Royal Iriſh Academy for the beſt Eſſay on that Subject.*

Ut ſilvæ foliis pronos mutantur in annos;
Prima cadunt: ita verborum vetus interit ætas,
Et, juvenum ritu, florent modo nata, vigentque.

HORACE.

Read June 18, 1796

THE progreſs of language marks the progreſs of the human mind. They proceed together with equal ſtep from the rudeneſs of barbariſm toward that ſtate beyond which improvement cannot go, i.e. which language exhibits the higheſt poliſh of elegance and accuracy, and the mind exerts all its faculties in their full force. So true is this, that there can ſcarcely be found any period in the hiſtory of any people when the ſtate of their language did not accurately correſpond with the ſtate of their polity and manners, and when a ſagacious obſerver might not have aſcertained, with tolerable exactneſs, the excellence and refinement of theſe from the qualities of their literary productions. Hence the inveſtigations of the philologiſt become uſeful as they furniſh important aids

to the reſearches of the hiſtorian, and the ſpeculations of the moraliſt.

To this general rule there is, however, one exception. Long before the manners of the Greeks had reached that refinement, or their polity had been matured to that perfection which conſtitute a nation highly civilized, their language had become copious, energetic and correct. In the compoſitions of Homer we find, perhaps, as much ſtrength, harmony and expreſſion, as in thoſe of any ſubſequent Greek writer; and yet unqueſtionably, in Homer's day, Greece had made no very conſiderable approaches towards excellence in the arts, ſkill in government, or refinement in manners.

But if in Greece we find an exception to the rule which marks on the ſcale of language the improvement of the national mind, in modern Europe we meet abundant illuſtration of its truth. Here, it will be found, that until ſettled government, founded on permanent ſyſtem, ſucceeded the fluctuations of deſpotiſm or anarchy, and, inſtead of the ferocious and whimſical manners of the middle ages, introduced the milder and more rational habits of modern times, until, in a word, the light of philoſophy ſhone in our horizon, and ſcattered the thick darkneſs which hung around the human intellect, the language of every people in Europe correſponded in coarſeneſs and confuſion with their modes of life and of thinking. Of this England herſelf is perhaps the moſt ſtriking inſtance. With a conſtitution which vibrated long between oppoſite extremes before it finally ſettled in the middle

point

point where liberty as well as truth is found, the moral character of her people was vague and changeful. Agitated long by civil conteſts, and depreſſed by the barbarous and deteriorating principles of the feudal policy, the human mind could not, and in fact did not, until a very late period, emerge from that deep groſſneſs into which by thoſe cauſes it had been ſunk. The language of England during thoſe times correſponded with her circumſtances. Rude and anomalous, at once ſuperfluous and deficient, it was equally a ſtranger to preciſion and to grace: fixed by no ſtandard, though it abounded in words, it was yet, becauſe thoſe words were vaguely uſed, incapable of expreſſing with accuracy any nice complication of thought. While men were unaccuſtomed to think with preciſion on moral topics, the whole claſs of moral terms muſt have been of changeful and indeterminate meaning; and while theſe topics were not the *frequent* ſubjects of living ſpeech or written diſcourſes, thoſe few but important words which are uſed, not to deſignate things, but to exhibit the various poſitions of the mind in thinking, to ſhew the relation which it means to eſtabliſh between two propoſitions, or the different parts of the ſame propoſition, muſt have been awkwardly and often improperly uſed. Such a ſtate of language could have exiſted only where taſte was yet unknown, and the powers of the human mind yet uncultivated.

Two cauſes contributed to raiſe the Engliſh language from this degraded ſtate. Firſt the Reformation, which by obtruding on the attention moral ſubjects of the moſt momentous concern, made it in ſome meaſure neceſſary for men to think with more

 preciſion

preciſion and cloſeneſs: Secondly, the ſubſequent diſputes between the crown and people on the limits of prerogative and popular right, which continued from the time of Elizabeth to the revolution, and which corroborated into habit that mode of cloſer and more abſtract thinking which the Reformation had introduced. According to the theory we have adopted this change ſhould have induced an improvement in ſtyle: it did ſo; the Engliſh language roſe rapidly from the low ſtate in which it ſtood in the beginning of the reign of Henry the Eighth, until, at the acceſſion of William the Third, it had acquired a diſtinguiſhed degree of excellence. This excellence, however, was but comparative, and appears rather when we conſider its former defects, than its ſubſequent improvements; for, from the time of the Revolution to the preſent day, a numerous ſucceſſion of fine writers have laboured with ſucceſs to add to its elegance, copiouſneſs and ſtrength. What they have done, and how far they have raiſed the Engliſh language above its former humble level, will be beſt known by conſidering the variations of ſtyle which, within that period, it has undergone.

In order to give a hiſtory of theſe variations it is not neceſſary to engage in a diſſertation on the ſtyle of every author of character who has written within the period which we conſider; nor indeed would ſuch a work be practicable within the limits of a ſhort eſſay: it will anſwer the end at which we aim to point out the general characteriſtics which have ſucceſſively diſtinguiſhed the ſtyle of Engliſh proſe within that time without engaging in a minute deſcription of the peculiarities of individual writers, except thoſe

thoſe by whom remarkable variations have been introduced, and whoſe diſtinguiſhed excellence has procured for thoſe variations a general adoption. Even this taſk, however, though leſs laborious and leſs prolix than the other, is not without its difficulty. Between the coarſe homelineſs of Burnet and the elaborate poliſh of Gibbon; between the looſe and uneven compoſition of Tillotſon, in which the ray of genius is ſo often obſcured by the medium through which it paſſes, and the cloſe preciſion of Johnſon, through which the bright idea ſhines with ſteady luſtre (if, indeed, it does not from the expreſſion itſelf derive much of that luſtre) the difference is great indeed, and to perceive it requires but little exertion of critical diſcernment. But other writers have varied eſſentially the ſtyle of Engliſh proſe between whoſe reſpective merits the difference is neither ſo great nor ſo obvious: here lies the difficulty. The difference of oppoſite colours is eaſily ſeen, and not difficult to be deſcribed; but of the variety of mixing tints which lie between the two extremes to mark with accuracy the points of tranſition; to catch the almoſt evaneſcent diſtinctions between collateral ſhades, and exhibit them with truth and ſteadineſs to the eye, is a work for which talents leſs common are neceſſary.

Though previous to the Revolution the ſtyle of Engliſh proſe had been greatly improved, it was notwithſtanding very far from being faultleſs. Scarcely any ſingle epithet, indeed, can be found to deſcribe its errors. It was looſe, negligent, capricious, and inaccurate: the periods were long and complicated; their parts clumſily connected; circumſtances which were neceſſary to be introduced

introduced into a ſentence were generally placed injudiciouſly; and in many inſtances clauſes were appended which ſhould have been formed into diſtinct ſentences. Even of thoſe writers who ranked higheſt for compoſition, the greater number abounded in ſynonymes, a ſure mark, not merely of negligent compoſition, but of looſe and inaccurate habits of thought. In the ſelection of words they were either negligent or unſkilful, for, in a multitude of inſtances, of two words which ſeemed to court choice, they choſe that which, by verging on burleſque, tended to degrade the ſubject, rather than that which would have ſuited its dignity. In metaphor they were copious; but their metaphors partook of the general character of their compoſition: they were often ill ſelected and frequently ill managed. Even when chance or choice produced a good figure, it was ſpun out through ſo many minute circumſtances, that judgment was diſguſted and atttention fatigued. Hence in thoſe writers may be found pages filled with materials, which, under the management of correct taſte, might have been raiſed to ſublimity or poliſhed to elegance, but which, in their hands, degenerate into quaintneſs and puerility. The rules for regulating the uſe of metaphor they frequently inverted, and inſtead of recurring to the metaphoric expreſſion when the literal one was mean or vulgar, they, in many inſtances, are found uſing trite and vulgar words metaphorically to convey, what in the literal expreſſion would not have been deſtitute of dignity.

Of *unity* in their ſentences they ſeem not to have been at all ſtudious. It would be difficult to find any production of that day

day in every page of which one may not find numerous inſtances of two, and ſometimes three or four, diſtinct and independent thoughts crowded into one ſentence: on the other hand, the inſtances are, perhaps, not more rare, of clauſes naturally and cloſely connected, as parts of the ſame whole, being divided into ſeparate periods.

FROM this negligence of diviſion, and inattention to minute circumſtances, this ſtyle has acquired an apparent freedom which in more poliſhed and elaborate compoſition is in vain looked for. The mind, regardleſs of accuracy in expreſſion, ſeems to have been attentive only to ideas—The torrent of thought is poured forth without heſitation or reſtraint, and rolls with at leaſt a free, if not a clear current. But, on cloſer examination, what appeared to be freedom of ſtyle is often found to be only looſeneſs of expreſſion. What was gained in the eaſy flowing of the ſentence was loſt by its want of perſpicuity, and when the period which filled the ear with harmonized ſounds comes to be conſidered by the underſtanding it is perceived to be inflated with ſuperfluous verbiage, or darkened by unneceſſary prolixity.

THAT he who uſes two words to expreſs one idea either does not underſtand, or does not attend to the meaning of the words he uſes, has often been obſerved. Whatever truth there may be in the remark, it is certain the writers of this period are frequently chargeable with this practice. Nor were they deficient in *preciſion* only, which is always deſtroyed by the introduction of

of ſuperfluous words; they, perhaps, not leſs frequently violated *propriety:* they not only uſed words in pairs to expreſs ſingle ideas, but of thoſe words, of which the meaning was not thus propped by ſubſidiary phraſes, the uſe was, in many inſtances, manifeſtly improper, and in ſtill more vague. In the uſe of corponding particles, too, the ſtyle of 88 was faulty in a great degree †. Nor was it erroneous merely in the manner of connecting the component clauſes of ſentences together; it was equally ſo in the connection of the ſentences themſelves. Among the writers of this period it is that we find the practice moſt prevalent of making *which*, at the beginning of one ſentence, a relative to the whole of that which precedes; and ſurely nothing in ſtyle can be more inartificial, nothing more repugnant to preciſion or to taſte.

BESIDES thoſe more important defects, there were others which equally violated grace though they did not equally induce obſcurity. Such are the frequent uſe of compound adverbs, *whereupon*, *whereas*, *wherein*, &c. the uſe of the obſolete pronominal adjectives *mine*, *thine*, before ſubſtantives; the formation of the ſuperlative degree by *eſt* in pollyſyllable adjectives; and the frequent introduction of colloquial idioms. Of theſe charges it will not be neceſſary to give any other proof than a reference to the

† Not unfrequently, for inſtance, *neither* and *or*, *either* and *nor* are made to correſpond, and *as* is often uſed as a relative to a ſubſtantive with *ſame* before it, " in " the *ſame* manner *as* is related, &c."

the writings of that day; if examples be wanted, they may be found thickly ſtrewed in every page of them *.

NOTWITH-

* A few of theſe examples are here ſubjoined, taken from Atterbury, Burnet, Tillotſon, Petty, Temple, &c. in which, it is believed, all the faults which have been above attributed to the ſtyle of this period are exemplified. Theſe inſtances have not been ſelected with a view to exhibit the moſt faulty paſſages in the works of the reſpective writers, but are ſuch as occurred on a caſual opening, and in ſome one compoſition of no great length, in each author. This mode of ſelection candour dictated; for where is the author who has written much, in whoſe writings invidious induſtry might not collect a multitude of paſſages cenſurable for their inaccuracy, or ridiculous for their weakneſs?

Tillotſon, in his ſermon on the incarnation, ſays, "God ſhewed not ſuch *grace* "and *favour* to the angels: the Son of God became mortal and miſerable, and "ſubmitted to all things that are accounted moſt *miſerable* and *calamitous* in our na-"ture." "He was the meekeſt endurer of ſufferings *that ever was*." Synonimes—a flat expreſſion, and a drag on the ſentence.

"*Which*, how it can be ſo eaſily conceived upon any other ſuppoſition, I muſt "confeſs I am not able to comprehend." Inartificial connection and bad grammar, *which* being referred to the whole of the preceding ſentence, and ſtanding without a verb.

"The tongues of men and angels, *as* they are ſaid to be a worthleſs gift in com-"pariſon of charity, *ſo* are they not able to ſet out *half* the *worth* and excellence of "it."

"*As* it makes a kind of atonement to God for all the faults we commit, *ſo* doth it "make *an amends* to us for all the trouble we are at."

Theſe two paſſages exemplify a poize between the two parts of a ſentence by *as* and *ſo*, which though perhaps not very faulty in itſelf becomes cenſurable from the frequency of its occurrence in the writings of this æra. They are beſides chargeable with ſynonimes, with baldneſs of expreſſion, with bad grammar and colloquial familiarity.

In Petty's Tract on the Conſtitution and Laws of England, we meet with the following:

"The next article may require a more eſpecial *care* and *conſideration* of the juſtices; "and here I judge we are no way deficient in *law*, but altogether in the *execution*

NOTWITHSTANDING the very general prevalence of thoſe errors in the ſtyle of Engliſh proſe at the period of the revolution, it muſt not

" of it. We ſhould not ſay our *laws* want reformation when 'tis only *ourſelves* " that want it. If our lawgivers never more *amend our laws*, we may *mend our ways* " with thoſe we have already. Care ſhould be taken to *keep* our highways in *repair*, " when the nation has been at the charge to *put* them in *good repair*." Synonimes and puerile antitheſes.

" Hence I ſhall *divide* and *diſtinguiſh* juſtices of the peace into honorary and acting." " But there is no neceſſity for that *neither*, &c." Synonimes and a double negative.

Burnet, in his ſermon at the Rolls Chapel, " That we ought *not* to truſt *neither* to " our reaſon *nor* our ſenſes." Double negative. " To demand an *equity*." An improper uſe of the word *equity*, as well as a harſh and coarſe expreſſion.

" On the contrary, in dark ages, nothing was more common than pretended *appa-* " *ritions* and *voices* to confirm *the* impoſture; *which* have vaniſhed in an age that is " more apt to ſuſpect and examine ſuch things, as the illuſions of our dreams fly from " us whenever we are awake." This ſentence is perfectly characteriſtic of the ſtyle of 88: *the* before impoſture is improperly uſed, as it is impoſture generally which he ſpeaks of, and to which therefore the definite article cannot be applied: the relative *which* is made to agree, not with the noun immediately preceding, but with *apparitions* and *voices:* to both of theſe nouns the verb *vaniſh* is applied, with the common inaccuracy of the writers of this period, though it can in propriety agree only to the firſt, for no man would talk of a *voice vaniſhing*. What follows in this ſentence ſhould have been matter for a new period, for to have deſcribed the prevalence of ſuperſtition through ſeveral ages was enough for one ſentence, and to deſcribe the ſuperiority of the preſent age another would not have been too much. *Suſpect* and *examine*, though certainly not ſynonimous, for many who ſuſpect will often not take the trouble to examine, yet, in the uſe that is here made of them, appear to be joined only for the ſake of company. In the laſt clauſe *when* would probably be much better both for ſound and ſenſe than *whenever*. " If reaſon be " once given up, no wonder if wealth and other ſecular advantages were *thrown* " *into the bargain*." A figure more fitted for the ſhop or the ſhambles than the writings of a biſhop.

In

not be underſtood that excellence in compoſition was at that time no where to be met with. Dryden ſtands a great and illuſtrious inſtance

In his Tract on the Gunpowder Treaſon, he talks of " the *head* contrivers of it, and of " heading the party that was *thereabouts*."

" They that knew their own work and were aſſigned to ſome particular office, " might know no more what they did, than *every little officer* in a regiment is " acquainted with the debates and reſolves of a council of war." Two inſtances of impropriety, *every* for *any*, and *little* for *petty*. Of *debates* and *reſolves* one is ſuperfluous.

" *Inſomuch* that full and clear evidence *as* we might have had, &c." " It was ne- " ceſſary for them to *ſtand upon their own vindication*, and to *vindicate* themſelves after " the moſt ſolemn way imaginable." Inaccurate connection and tautology.

" Till this order was univerſally *diſſolved* and *extirpated*." Synonimous. " *If ſo be* " it might be done." Vulgariſm. " I ſhall ſhew they might *ſtand upon* their own " innocency and juſtification to *the* death." In his Letter on the Diſcovery of the Plot, he ſays, " the Church *has not* been *acted* with the ſame ſpirit, *nor* followed the " ſame doctrines, &c." *Acted* uſed improperly for *actuated*, and *nor* uſed for *or*. " Theſe doctrines will ſoon be *taken off the file*." A trite and degrading metaphor.

Atterbury on the Miraculous Propagation of the Goſpel, ſays, (and certainly it is not one of his moſt faulty ſentences) " Its original ſucceſs was a *perpetual ſtanding* mi- " racle of ſufficient force to evince its divine extraction, from the *beginning of* " *Chriſtianity to the* end of it." It was unneceſſary to ſay, that what was a *perpetual* miracle was alſo a *ſtanding* one; and that is unqueſtionably careleſs and inaccurate compoſition, in which one finds ſuch a clauſe as this, where he talks of " the " *extraction of Chriſtianity, from the beginning to the end of it. Chriſtianity*, too, is here " uſed for the *Chriſtian æra*.

" The Moſaic law was intended for a ſingle people, who were to be ſhut in, *as it* " *were*, by a *fence* of legal rites and typical ceremonies, and to be kept by *that means* " *ſeparate* and *unmixed* till the Meſſiah ſhould appear, and *break down the fence*, and " *lay open the encloſure*." This paſſage exemplifies more faults than one; it will ſuffice however to remark, that it contains a metaphor expanded till it becomes vapid and puerile.

inſtance of correctneſs and elegance in proſe, as well as of harmony and fire in poetry. His Prefaces and his Critical Eſſays are written in

On the power of charity he obſerves that this virtue, " if it have the *reins given to it*, will *run away with the rider*." This is burleſque, and he is not much ſhort of it when he tells us, that " God has *twiſted* our duty and our intereſt together," and that the other virtues " *ſtand on their own bottom*."

" Charity is the queen of virtues; the reſt are in her train and retinue, *as it were*, " conſtantly attending her, *appearing* and *diſappearing*." Another inſtance of ſuperfluous words, over-wrought metaphor, and of a heavy adjection clogging the ſentence.

In his ſermon on the Unity, Tillotſon talks of the Sun, as " the moſt *worſhipful* of all ſenſible beings," as if he wiſhed to raiſe a ludicrous idea in the mind rather than to exhibit that luminary " as the eye and ſoul of this great world." Of the heroes he ſays, that " for their great and *worthy* deeds, when *they lived upon earth*, they were " diſtinguiſhed by poſthumous honours." But it would be ſuperfluous to dwell on ſuch paſſages as theſe while one can find ſuch a ſentence as the following, which concenters in itſelf almoſt all the errors with which we have charged the ſtyle of 88.

" One cannot deny the frame of this world which he *ſees with his eyes*, though from " *thence* it will follow that either that or ſomething elſe muſt be of itſelf; *which* yet, as " I ſaid before, is a *thing which* no man can comprehend *how it can be*." In this ſentence it is difficult to collect to what antecedent *thence* is referred; it can properly refer only to the preceding propoſition " one cannot deny the frame, &c." and referring to that the concluſion will not follow; it muſt therefore refer to " *frame*," and the connection in that caſe will be obſcure and illogical. " *Which* yet, as I ſaid before, is a thing, &c." Here we find, after two or three readings, that the relative which is connected with the *laſt clauſe* of the preceding member of the ſentence as an antecedent, and the propoſition, contained in that clauſe, is called a thing; the latter *which* is a relative to this *thing*, that is to the foregoing *which*—that is to the propoſition in the laſt clauſe of the firſt member of the ſentence; and this latter *which* ſtands without any verb, for the clauſe " *how it can be*" ſtands as the objective caſe to " *no man can com-* " *prehend*." Such a ſentence ſeems the *ne ultra* of looſe, confuſed and negligent ſtyle.

From Tillotſon we ſhall give but two other examples—the firſt to illuſtrate the inartificial manner in which he divided his ſentences; the other, from his diſcourſe on the difficulty of reforming vicious habits, to prove how extremely attached he, as well his contemporaries, was to the practice of giving to every word a fellow.

" The

in a manner which, as has been obſerved even by the faſtidious Johnſon, would not, even at the preſent day, after the lapſe of more

" The temporal *calamities* and *ſufferings* with which the Jews had been haraſſed, " had weaned them from the conſideration of temporal promiſes, and awakened their " minds to more ſerious thoughts of another *world. It being natural* to men when they " are deſtitute of preſent comfort, to ſupport themſelves, &c." Evidently theſe two ſentences ſhould have been molded into one—the ſenſe, as well as the expreſſion, required it. " From his great *mercy* and *pity* declared to us in all thoſe gracious *means* and " *methods* which he uſeth for our recovery, and from his *readineſs* and *forwardneſs* after " all our rebellions, &c." " The *cuſtom* and *frequent practice* of any thing begets in us a " *facility* and *eaſineſs* in doing it; it turns the *ſtream* and *current* of our actions ſuch " a way."

Sir William Temple has been conſidered as one of the fineſt writers of this period; the following paſſages, from this Tract on the Low Countries, with which we ſhall conclude theſe extracts, evince that he is not exempt from the common errors of his cotemporaries:

" Charity ſeems to be very national. Among the many and various hoſpitals that " are *in every man's curioſity and talk* that travel this country, I was affected with none " more than that of Euchuyſen for aged ſeamen, which is *contrived, finiſhed and* " *ordered* as if it was *done* with the kind intention of ſome well-natured man, that " thoſe who had paſſed their *whole* lives in the *hardſhips* and *incommodities* of the ſea " ſhould find a retreat ſtored with all the *eaſes* and *conveniences* that old age is capable " of feeling or of enjoying: *for*, one of thoſe old ſeamen entertaining me *a good* " *while* with the plain ſtories of fifty years voyages and adventures *while* I was " viewing the hoſpital and the church adjoining, I gave him a piece of their coin " about the value of a crown piece: He took it ſmiling, and offered it to me again, " *but* when I refuſed it, he aſked me what he ſhould do with money—for *all that* " *ever they* wanted was provided for them at their houſe: I left him to overcome his " modeſty as well as he could, but a ſervant coming after me ſaw him give it to a " little girl *that opened the church door as ſhe paſt by him; which* made me reflect, &c."

" Wine to hot brains being like oil to fire, and making the ſpirits, by too much " lightneſs, evaporate into *ſmoak* and *perfect airy imaginations*, or by too much *head*, " rage into frenzy, or at leaſt into *humours* and *thoughts* that have a great mixture " of it."

more than a century, be thought obſolete, and might, even now, be preſcribed as a model of many of the graces of compoſition. Its eaſy and natural flow, its gracefulneſs and rich variety, cannot, after all the improvements which in ſo long a period have been made in our language, be eaſily exceeded by modern taſte and ſkill in writing. Yet even Dryden himſelf, with all his merits, affords ſome inſtances, though certainly they are but thinly ſcattered, of moſt of the faults of which his contemporaries are guilty. In his Eſſay on Heroic poetry, for inſtance, we find ſuch a paſſage as the following: "For their (the poets) ſpeculations on this ſub-"ject are wholly poetical; they have only fancy for their guide, "and that being *ſharper* in an excellent poet than in a heavy, "phlegmatic gownſman, will *ſee farther* in its own empire, and pro-"duce *more ſatisfactory motions* on thoſe *dark and doubtful* problems." He is ſometimes ungrammatical, and ſometimes violates propriety, as when he ſays "to which I have added ſome original, *which*, "whether *they* are equal or inferior to my other poems *an* author "is the moſt improper judge, and therefore I leave them wholly "to the mercy of the reader." But it would be invidious to enumerate examples of this kind in ſuch an author as Dryden, whoſe beauties, both in proſe and poetry, ſo far out-number his defects, and whoſe ſuperiority over his cotemporaries is too evident to the moſt ordinary reader to be denied or doubted.

If the character of this period for ſtyle could be ſaved by the merits of one or two individuals, Spratt might be adduced with Dryden to vindicate the taſte of his age. In his works may be found paſſages nicely correct and of extreme elegance. In general he

he avoids ſynonimes, makes a happy ſelection of words, and forms them into ſentences of much harmony. Though it cannot perhaps be truly ſaid that in the management of his metaphors he is always happy, yet it would be difficult to find in him ſo many inſtances of over-wrought, or ill-choſen figures, as in any of his contemporaries equally voluminous. In the connection of his ſentences he probably is not ſo blameleſs. His hiſtory of the Royal Society has been praiſed for its compoſition, and that it is ſtill read is a proof that it deſerves the praiſes which have been given to it; but I am not ſure that in his leſs celebrated "Account of the Plot," there do not occur paſſages which better merit the character of fine writing than any which are to be met in his hiſtory of the Society, or any other of his tracts.

HAD not Hooker written too early† to rank among thoſe writers of whom we have been ſpeaking, he would have afforded ample ſubject of commendation for purity of language and preciſion in ſtyle; in other inſtances, perhaps, ſome for cenſure. At preſent it is enough to obſerve that by comparing the writings of Hooker with thoſe of the beſt authors of 88, it will appear that in the intervening century much leſs improvement had been effected in the ſtyle of Engliſh proſe than has taken place in the interval between the Revolution and the preſent day.

WITH all theſe faults in ſtyle, the writers of this period are to be reckoned among thoſe who have raiſed moſt high the literary character

* Hooker died in the year 1600.

character of their country. They have, indeed, a claim to higher praiſe than that of poliſhed compoſition; they abounded in good ſenſe, and in fine genius, and had an extenſive knowledge of the lettered and of the living world. Let not, therefore, the flimſy and ſuperficial, though, perhaps, more accurate writer of modern times, pretend that becauſe his trifles ſparkle with more brilliancy and exhibit a ſmoother ſurface, they are, therefore, ſuperior to the rich and ſolid, though leſs poliſhed, productions of this period: our anceſtors wrote for fame as they ſtrove for liberty, with the ſtrong minds of men more attentive to things than words; we, perhaps, in the ſickly taſte of modern refinement, prefer form to ſubſtance, and ſubſtitute elegance of expreſſion for ſound ſenſe.

With Addiſon and his contemporaries originated the firſt variation that occurred, ſubſequent to the Revolution, in the compoſition of Engliſh proſe. Though the diffuſe ſtyle ſtill continued to prevail, it was no longer the looſe, inaccurate and clumſy ſtyle by which the compoſitions of his predeceſſors were diſgraced. So great, indeed, was the improvement, and ſo ſtriking the variation introduced by Addiſon, that he who compares the productions of this elegant writer with thoſe of the beſt writers of 88, will find it difficult to avoid ſurpriſe, how, with ſuch precedents before him, he could have riſen at once to a degree of excellence in ſtyle which conſtitutes him a model for imitation. The forced metaphor, the dragging clauſe, the harſh cadence, and the abrupt cloſe, are all of them ſtrangers to the works of Addiſon. In the ſtructure of his ſentences, though we may ſometimes meet marks

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of negligence, yet we can ſeldom find the unity of a ſentence violated by ideas crowded together, or the ſenſe obſcured by an improper connection of clauſes. Though, like his predeceſſors, he frequently uſes two words to expreſs one idea, yet, in this inſtance, he is leſs faulty than they; and, among the variations introduced by him, we muſt reckon a more ſtrict attention to the choice of words, and more preciſion in the uſe of them.

Of figurative language Addiſon has always been acknowledged the moſt happy model. He was, indeed, the firſt of the Engliſh proſe writers who were equally excellent in the choice and in the management of their figures. Of thoſe who preceded him, it has been obſerved that they were frequently unhappy in both inſtances; that their metaphors either were ſuch as tended rather to degrade their ſubject than to give it dignity and elevation; or that when they were well choſen, they were ſpoiled by the manner in which they were conducted, being detained under the pen until their ſpirit evaporated, or traced until the likeneſs vaniſhed. Addiſon avoided both faults: his metaphors are ſelected with care and taſte, or rather ſeem to ſpring ſpontaneouſly from his ſubject; they are exhibited to the mind but for a moment that the leading traits of ſimilitude may be obſerved while minute likeneſſes are diſregarded—like thoſe flaſhes of electric fire which often illumine a Summer's night, they ſhed a vivid, though a tranſient luſtre, over the ſcene, and pleaſe rather by the brightneſs with which they gild the proſpect than the accuracy with which they ſhew its beauties.

SHOULD it be doubted, whether the improvement of ſtyle which took place in the time of Addiſon—that variation which ſubſtituted uniform and correct neatneſs in compoſition, for what was looſe, inaccurate and capricious, be juſtly attributed to him—the doubt will vaniſh when it is remembered that in no work prior to his time is an equal degree of accuracy or neatneſs to be found, and even among thoſe periodical papers to which the moſt eminent of his cotemporary writers contributed, the CLIO of Addiſon ſtands eminently conſpicuous. It was, indeed, from the productions of that claſſic and copious mind that the public ſeems to have caught the taſte for fine writing which has operated from that time to the preſent, and which has given to our language perhaps the greateſt degree of elegance and accuracy of which it is ſuſceptible—for if any thing is yet to be added to the improvement of the Engliſh ſtyle, it muſt be more nerve and muſcle, not a nicer modification of form or feature.

——— ſectantem levia, nervi
Deficiunt animique:

WHILE Addiſon was communicating to Engliſh proſe a degree of correctneſs with which it had been, till his time, unacquainted, Swift was exemplifying its preciſion and giving a ſtandard for its purity. Swift was the firſt writer who attempted to expreſs his meaning without ſubſidiary words and corroborating phraſes. He nearly laid aſide the uſe of ſynonimes in which even Addiſon had a little indulged, and without being very ſolicitous about the ſtructure or harmony

mony of his periods, ſeemed to devote all his attention to illuſtrate the force of individual words. Swift hewed the ſtones, and fitted the materials for thoſe who built after him; Addiſon left the neateſt and moſt finiſhed models of ornamental architecture.

Of the character which is here given of theſe two writers it is unneceſſary to give proof by quoting paſſages from their works, for two reaſons; the one is, that their works are in the hands of every body; the other, that the qualities which we attribute to their ſtyle are ſo obvious that it were ſuperfluous to illuſtrate them.

Besides thoſe firſt reformers of the ſtyle of 1688, there were others, contemporary with them, who contributed to promote the work which they did not begin. Bolingbroke and Shaftſbury, like Addiſon, were elegant and correct, and ſeem from him to have derived their correctneſs and elegance. Of this, ſo far as it concerns Shaftſbury, there is a moſt remarkable proof*. His Tract, entitled "An Enquiry concerning Virtue," was in the hands of the public in 1699, in a ſtate very different indeed from that in which his lordſhip publiſhed, in the year 1726. It partook of all the faults which were prevalent in the ſtyle of that day, but particularly in the length of its periods, and the inartificial connection of them. In the edition of 1726 thoſe errors were in a great meaſure corrected; the ſentences are broken down, and molded with much

* See Blair's Lectures.

elegance into others leſs prolix; and ſharing in ſome degree all the beauties of Addiſon's ſtyle, except thoſe which perhaps his lordſhip could not copy, its eaſe and ſimplicity. Indeed Shaftſbury, in the form in which we now have him, appears to be more attentive than Addiſon to the harmony of his cadence, and the regular conſtruction of his ſentences; and certainly if he has leſs ſimplicity has more ſtrength. Bolingbroke, too, participating in correctneſs with Addiſon, has ſome topics of peculiar praiſe; he has more force than Addiſon—and—what may appear ſtrange, when we conſider how much more vehement and copious he is, has more preciſion. The nature of the ſubjects on which Bolingbroke and Shaftſbury wrote naturally tended to make them more attentive to preciſion than Addiſon. Theſe ſubjects were principally abſtract morality and metaphyſics—ſubjects of which no knowledge can be attained but by cloſe and ſteady thinking, or communicated but by words of definite and conſtant meaning. The language of Addiſon, however elegant in itſelf, or however admirably adapted by its eaſy flow to thoſe familiar topics which are generally the ſubjects of diurnal eſſays, was too weak for the weight of abſtract moral diſquiſition, and too vague for the niceties of metaphyſical diſtinction. It was fitted for him whoſe object was to catch what floated on the ſurface of life; but it could not ſerve him who was to enter into the depths of the human mind, to watch the progreſs of intellectual operation, and embody to the vulgar eye thoſe ever fleeting forms under which the paſſions vary.

It might afford much matter of curious ſpeculation to the philologiſt, to enquire whether it was this aptitude in the language of Addiſon to thoſe light topics of writing in which he excelled that directed his choice of ſubjects, or whether his peculiar caſt of ſtyle was formed by his choice of ſuch topics. Probably both operated, or rather both were effects of the ſame cauſe. A man's caſt of thought gives a character to his ſtyle, and where choice is free, the ſubject for compoſition is determined by the complexion of the mind. But whatever might have been the cauſe of Addiſon's excellence in point of ſtyle, or that of his compeers Bolingbroke and Shaftſbury, it is certain that for ſome time previous to the revolution there had been cauſes in operation which neceſſarily tended to produce a general improvement in the ſtyle of Engliſh proſe. Some of thoſe have been already hinted above; there are others that deſerve mention. Not only had the religious and political diſputes which had called forth and in ſome meaſure ſharpened the intellect of the nation, introduced a poſitive improvement in compoſition—they did more; they ſowed the ſeeds of ſtill farther and more important improvements, by diffuſing a taſte, and in ſome meaſure creating a neceſſity for ſtudy. Claſſical learning had been revived by the reformation. Inſtead of the barbariſms of monkiſh Latin, the public had gotten a taſte, not only of the fine writings of antient Rome, but of the compoſitions of the poets and hiſtorians of Greece, who had been ſo long buried beneath the rubbiſh of popiſh ignorance. Literary conteſts, created by political differences, diffuſed ſtill more widely a knowledge of thoſe beſt models of compoſition—for on a queſtion of government

government or of liberty, to whom could reference be ſo ſafely or naturally made as to thoſe who were ſuppoſed to have known beſt the theory of the one and the practice of the other? In fact, claſſical learning was perhaps never more cultivated in England than for ſome time previous to the revolution, and in ſuch circumſtances it was impoſſible that ſtyle ſhould not have improved in its moſt eſſential qualities.

It has been already obſerved that the ſtyle of Dryden was in almoſt every point of view much ſuperior to that of the writers of his day. So far then as he exhibited to the public better models of proſe compoſition, ſo far muſt he have contributed to improve the ſtyle of that and the ſucceeding period. But excluſive of this excellence in his writings, the nature of the ſubjects of which he treated in many of his proſe works contributed ſtill more to improve the taſte of his countrymen in compoſition. Many of his prefaces are profeſſedly critical diſſertations on various kinds of writing, and in theſe he communicated to the public, even to thoſe of them who were not the learned, ſuch true principles of taſte, and ſound rules of judgment, as muſt neceſſarily have accelerated their approach to that accuracy and elegance which Engliſh proſe ſo ſhortly afterward began to diſplay.

There was a ſtill more immediate cauſe of improvement in the ſtyle both of his Proſe and Poetry. The poliſh and refinement of the court of Charles II. of which the diſſoluteneſs was the grave of the morality of the nation, was perhaps the parent of much of that elegance which characterized Addiſon, and thoſe authors who cultivated

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our language in the ſucceeding reigns. The public taſte was improved by ingrafting the light beauties of French literature on the ſolid ſtock of Engliſh learning; and then by a happy concurrence of circumſtances our language came to unite copiouſneſs and ſtrength with grace and elegance.

So wide was the variation of the ſtyle of Addiſon and his cotemporaries from that of the period of 1788, that no ſubſequent variation was ſo great or ſo obvious. His ſound judgment and fine taſte raiſed the language in which he wrote, at one effort, as much above its former level as the continued improvements of ſucceeding writers raiſed it above that at which he left it. Improvement, however, it did receive, and among thoſe who contributed to that improvement the amiable Goldſmith holds, perhaps, the higheſt place. Poſſeſſing all the qualities which conſtitute a fine writer, intellect, erudition, and above all, *taſte* in compoſition, diſtinguiſhed equally by the mild fertility of his imagination, and the correct copiouſneſs of his language, he ſeems to have carried the improvements of Addiſon's ſtyle almoſt as far as they could be carried. But even in this its higheſt ſtate of excellence it was ſtill the ſtyle of Addiſon, diſtinguiſhed by nothing but a greater degree of thoſe qualities for which the writings of Addiſon were remarkable. As it would, therefore, be improper, perhaps, to call thoſe improvements *variations* in ſtyle, it will be permitted in an eſſay of this nature to paſs them over without more particular notice, and come at once to thoſe changes which have been introduced by Dr. Johnſon—the coloſſus of Engliſh literature—the multiplicity and excellence of whoſe

whoſe writings have raiſed up ſuch an hoſt of imitators, of friends and of enemies.

JOHNSON varied the ſtyle of Engliſh proſe in three inſtances—in the form of its phraſes, in the conſtruction of ſentences, and in diction. To deſcribe accurately theſe variations were to give an Eſſay on his ſtyle and writings; and this has been already ſo ably done by a member of this Society * that it would be unſafe and unneceſſary again to attempt it. The nature of this Eſſay, however, requires that on this ſubject ſomething ſhould be ſaid, not to point out his beauties or defects, but merely to mark the variations which he has introduced.

OF the changes in phraſeology introduced by Johnſon the principal is the ſubſtitution of the ſubſtantive expreſſing the quality in the abſtract for the adjective expreſſing it in concrete, or, the verbal ſubſtantive for the verb itſelf. Thus when he ſays that "none of the axioms which recommend the antient ſages to "veneration ſeems to have required leſs extent of knowledge "or leſs perſpicacity of penetration than the remark of Bias, "οι πλεονες κακοι," he ſubſtitutes extent for extenſive, and *perſpicacity* for *acute*: and when he makes Dicaulus ſay that "every "tongue was diligent in *prevention* or *revenge*," he makes him ſay what in the language of other men would have been "diligent "to prevent or to revenge."

BY

* Vide Dr. Burrowes' Eſſay on this ſubject in the Memoirs of the Royal Iriſh Academy.

By the frequent uſe of this phraſeology Johnſon has given a degree of ſtrength and ſolidity to his ſentences which he could have given them, perhaps, by no other means, The advantages of it have been pointed out in the eſſay above alluded to; the caſes in which it may properly be uſed, and the inſtances in which Johnſon has uſed it improperly, are there mentioned, and to mention them again would be but to repeat what has already been eloquently ſaid.

In the conſtruction of his ſentences he has many peculiarities. One of theſe is, the habit of placing the oblique caſe at the beginning, and introducing between it and the word by which it is governed ſome qualifying circumſtance. Inſtances abound: "*Of two objects tempting at a diſtance on contrary ſides*, it is im- "poſſible to approach *one* but by receding from the *other.*"— "*Many concluſions* did I *form*, and many experiments did I *try*, &c." "*From the hope* of enjoying affluence by methods more com- "pendious than thoſe of labour, and more generally practicable "than thoſe of genius, *proceeds* the common inclination to experi- "ment and hazard," &c. &c.

Of this practice the principal effect ſeems to be that of ſtrongly impreſſing the mind by exhibiting firſt to its view the principal object of the ſentence. In grave compoſitions it gives a tone of dignity and ſtrength which admirably correſponds with the nature of the ſubject, and with reſpect to ſound its advantages are equally important, as by affording a liberty of tranſpoſition

it enables the writer to arrange his clauſes in the moſt harmonious manner. The diſadvantages of this practice are, that it gives a formality to compoſition which is not adapted to the eaſy familiarity of the lighter kinds of writing, and, by leading too frequently to tranſpoſition, may ſometimes induce obſcurity.

It may be reckoned among his peculiarities of this kind, that he crowds together, generally at the end of his ſentences, a number of phraſes ſimilarly conſtructed. Perhaps there is no mode of expreſſion of which he gives ſo many examples. "He "who is unfurniſhed with any arts that might amuſe his leiſure "is condemned to wear out a taſteleſs life in calamities *which* "*few will hear*, and *which none will pity*." "A careleſs glance on "a favourite author is generally ſufficient to ſupply the firſt hint or "ſeminal idea, which enlarged by the gradual accretion of matter "ſtored in the mind, is, by the warmth of fancy, eaſily *expanded* "*into flowers*, and ſometimes *ripened into fruit*." "—— to whom "we ſunk into humble companions without choice or influence, "expected only *to echo their opinions*, *facilitate their deſires* and *ac-* "*company their rambles*." "When the trader pretends anxiety "about the payment of his bills, and the beauty remarks how "frightfully ſhe looks, then is the lucky moment to talk *of* "*riches*, or *of charms*, *of the death of lovers*, or *the honour of a* "*merchant*."

There is, probably, no mode of conſtructing a ſentence better calculated than this for introducing, without confuſion or obſcurity, a great

great number adjunct ideas. To a mind ſtored like that of Johnſon with much of the beſt learning of antient and modern times, and with that knowledge which only an attentive obſervation of life can beſtow; to a ſagacity like his, which ſaw almoſt intuitively through a chain of conſequences, and to a comprehenſive mind, ſuch as he poſſeſſed, which took in at a glance a great number of collateral circumſtances, this ſtructure of a ſentence was a neceſſary inſtrument of communication; it gave ſimplicity to what was complex, and unity to what was manifold. But let the writer who has not Johnſon's ſtock of ideas, his ſagacity or his comprehenſion, beware of imitating. When trivial circumſtances are enumerated in this pompous phraſe, or words not of diſtinct meaning exhibited in long-ſounding triods, good ſenſe and good taſte are diſguſted: the dwarf in giants armour is more contemptible than in his native littleneſs.

But however the ſtyle of Johnſon may be characterized, or however Engliſh proſe compoſition may have been improved by theſe peculiarities of conſtruction, it is by his nice ſelection and correct uſe of words that *he* is principally diſtinguiſhed, and the Engliſh language principally benefitted. The ſtudent who, in tranſlating Virgil into other Latin, complained of the difficulty of his taſk, "*quia optimum quodque verbum Virgilius uſurpavit*," becauſe Virgil had preoccupied the words beſt fitted to expreſs his meaning, paid to the Latin poet a compliment which might with equal truth be paid to the Engliſh moraliſt. It would be difficult to convey in ſo many other wordsthe preciſe import of any ſen-

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tence which he has written. There are few if any words ſynonymous in any language: Johnſon, who could diſtinguiſh the moſt minute ſhades of difference in the meaning of terms, always choſe that which belonged excluſively to the idea he would expreſs; and where the language afforded no word that would expreſs his thought with preciſion he reſorted to a Latin word, and giving it an Engliſh dreſs and the ſtamp of his own authority, adopted it into the language.

For the frequency of theſe adoptions Johnſon has been blamed; and when an Engliſh word could be found commenſurate in its meaning to the idea he would convey, and not debaſed by vulgar uſe, he was, no doubt, blameable in reſorting to another language. That he has ſometimes juſtly incurred this cenſure it were vain to deny: but it will be found, perhaps, on examination, that he did not *often* reſort to exotic words, when he could have found Engliſh words of equal force and equal dignity. He did not generally, with the jealous policy of a conqueror, raiſe foreigners to favour to the excluſion of native worth; but in the true ſpirit of a patriot, ſought abroad for a ſupply of thoſe wants which he found to prevail at home.

The Engliſh is, perhaps, the only language ſprung from the Gothic ſtock into which Greek and Latin words can eaſily be adopted, and it is to this facility of adoption that it owes its ſuperior ſtrength and richneſs. Johnſon, therefore, when he adopts from thoſe languages words more appropriate to his meaning than the Engliſh language could furniſh, does only that which

which had been done by others before him, only carries farther an improvement which he did not begin, and adds to thoſe ſtores which the induſtry of others had begun to accumulate. This conſideration however will not always bear him out blameleſs; ſome words he has adopted, for the adoption of which he cannot plead either neceſſity or uſe, for he could have found at home words of preciſely the ſame import and of not leſs dignity. But it is contended that he has not *often* thus erred; that on the whole he has enriched the Engliſh language, and that, therefore, he deſerves not merely impunity but praiſe.

Besides theſe diſtinguiſhing features in the ſtyle of Johnſon, by which he has varied the ſtyle of Engliſh proſe, there is another equally prominent which it ſhall ſuffice barely to mention—the frequent perſonification of virtues and vices, of habits and of actions *.

Subsequent to Johnſon there does not ſeem to have occurred any variation in the ſtyle of Engliſh proſe, notwithſtanding the immenſe numbers of modern writers under whoſe labours the preſs has groaned. Of theſe the greater number have no peculiar character in compoſition; others have imitated, ſome with more and ſome with leſs ſucceſs, the ſtyle of Johnſon; and ſome, as a Burke and a † Reynolds, have riſen in ſome inſtances, perhaps, above him.

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* Thoſe peculiarities of Johnſon's ſtyle are found to prevail moſt in his Rambler. His Idler is leſs ſtrongly marked by them, and they are ſtill leſs ſtrong in his Lives; a work by which, perhaps, his excellence as an Engliſh proſe writer is moſt fully confirmed.

† Sir Joſhua Reynolds in his Diſcourſes to the Royal Academy.

Were we now conſidering the abſtract merits of the authors we mention, it would be unpardonable indeed not to beſtow on the vivid energy of Burke, and the mild and chaſte elegance of Sir Joſhua, a large ſhare of attention and panegyric. But ſuch is not the object of this eſſay: we muſt therefore paſs over theſe, as we have paſſed over Goldſmith and others, in ſilence, becauſe though the excellence of theſe writings is ſingularly great, that excellence does not conſiſt in any *variations* which thoſe have introduced into ſtyle, but in the height to which they have carried thoſe principles of compoſition which had been cultivated, though leſs ſucceſsfully, by others before them.

In treating of the various ſtyles which have ſucceſſively appeared from the revolution to the preſent time I have purpoſely omitted ſome which may be thought from their ſingularity to have deſerved notice. Such, for inſtance, is that of Mr. Sterne. This I have paſſed over without remark, becauſe, in the firſt inſtance, it was merely the ſtyle of an individual, and has never been generally adopted by Engliſh proſe writers; and, in the ſecond place, becauſe it ſeems to have been the emanation of an eccentric mind, conveying its thoughts in language as capricious, and, perhaps, affected, as the ſentiments which ſuggeſted them, and as looſe as the moral principles by which they were regulated.